

Selling the Tudor Monarchy: Authority and Image in Sixteenth-Century England

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Author:

Kevin Sharpe

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Lucy Wooding

Selling the Tudor Monarchy is large, colourful, contentious and far-reaching. It is the first of three volumes stretching from the 15th to the 18th centuries, examining the representations of monarchs from Henry VII to Queen Anne. This is a bold undertaking, but this first volume suggests that it is one very much suited to Kevin Sharpe's strengths. The prose is fluent and accessible, the ideas striking, the argument assertive and wide-ranging, based on a vast array of different sources. This volume deals with the Tudors, and moves with assurance from delicate and detailed analysis of different texts and images to broad and arresting interpretations of the nature of authority, the growth of the 'public sphere', and the transformation of monarchy.

Sharpe argues that early modern historians need to wake up to a body of evidence which has been neglected for far too long. The many different ways in which monarchs were represented - by themselves, their courtiers, their subjects and their critics - have something of vital importance to tell us about the exercise of power in the 16th century. 'The business of government was the act of securing compliance', and by studying representations of authority we can see how this was attempted, mediated, received and implemented. He sees this as 'negotiation rather than autocratic enactment', and suggests that the 16th century saw a wide range of responses to the 'uncertainty in early modern England about whether government was an act of faith or statecraft'. This was not a matter of the simple imposition of authority, or a straightforward attempt to manipulate popular opinion. Representations of the monarch were crafted by an array of different individuals at all levels of society, and the same image could be communicated and understood in many different ways. Portraits might flatter both the subject and the patron; royal progresses

could have several scripts; portraying a monarch as an Old Testament character was open to pious or prophane readings.

At the simplest level, then, this book is immensely valuable because of the range of sources it uses, and the connections it makes between them. Plays, poems, prayers and proclamations are set alongside translations, polemics, portraits, coins, seals, processions, masques, progresses, court rituals, funerals, coronations, architecture and a lot more besides. Sharpe also insists that 'we must consider, as well as statements and objects, silences, spaces and alternatives'. Just to bring all of this together is an achievement in itself. Sharpe's concern, however, is how to 'read' these many and varied images, visual, verbal and ritual. He sees them as 'dialogues with subjects', not the simple transmission of statements about authority but a series of exchanges about the nature and validity of that authority.

This 'dialogue' was growing rapidly in scope and intensity during this period. Sharpe notes the proliferation of images, particularly during Elizabeth's reign, partly encouraged by technological advances in printing or portraiture, partly a response to a growing market economy. He argues for the emergence of a Tudor 'public sphere', suggesting that a unique concern with art, spectacle and display gave the early modern era a concern with 'the theatricalization of regality' which would be lost after 1688, and not resurface until the Victorian age. Yet this was not a 'public sphere' formed in *opposition* to the state; rather it was an outgrowth *from* the state. Opposition to a monarch was more likely to appropriate official imagery than destroy or repudiate it. Critics of Henry VIII could take his self-presentation as the Old Testament King David and instead of David's piety, regality and musicianship read instead a message about his sins, especially his adultery, and the disaster which followed from it. For Sharpe, it was the Henrician Reformation that gave birth to the 'public sphere' in England, and in his view 'we can be in no doubt that Henry VIII and his successors discerned a public sphere which was far removed from the passive subjects discussed by Habermas'. Not so much print and coffee-houses here, as a hugely important oral culture, public debate and participation alongside an emerging 'consumer culture'.

In Sharpe's understanding, this had profound consequences. He argues that 'the shift from a representational state to a public sphere effected a change to a state in which the mystification of majesty became less the programme of rulers and governments and more the election and desire of subjects and citizens'. At one level, therefore, this study of representations is the study of popular political empowerment. From the start, Sharpe links his arguments to the modern preoccupation with 'spin', and it is surely significant that the seed of this project was sown during the 1980s, when the author lived for a time in both England and America, and observed the ways in which contemporary political processes were changing. This history of 'Tudor spin' makes it clear that representations of rule, even if they were not created at the popular level, were given force by the ways in which they were received and understood by the populace. It is not just that the 'language of signs in early modern England was by no means the monopoly of the elite'. It is that what mattered was how these signs were *read*, rather than how they were *intended* to be read. Many of the media used 'deployed a language of request and reciprocity'. Sharpe notes, for example, how royal letters, 'in writing, performing and publishing an act of power also exposed power as script, performance and publication'. The language of government might be understood as a 'fiction of state', open to interpretation and challenge at all times.

At the heart of this book are some important convictions about historical method. The first long chapter of this volume is a very interesting and thought-provoking discussion of the author's methodology, which in Sharpe's view, is too often neglected or avoided by most early modern historians. His approach is grounded on an awareness of the 'readers' turn', invoking Terry Eagleton, insisting that it is how these images were read that gives them meaning. 'The turn from authors to readers in critical studies has been central to my approach', he states firmly, and he is highly critical of historians who, 'anxious about the risk of anachronism', have shied away from examining representations, images, appearances, and chose to concentrate instead on 'what they regard as substantial and real'. He therefore rejects the 'traditional historical distinction between events and representations'. He also presents a lively manifesto for the importance of studying material culture and bridging the gaps between history, literary criticism, art history and other pertinent disciplines. This is a vivid and provocative chapter, which embraces sources as various

as the Bayeux Tapestry and Victoria's Highland Journals.

Applying these techniques to each Tudor monarch in turn, the conclusions are perhaps unsurprising, but the evidence is fascinating. Henry VII was intensely concerned with ritual and display in his attempts to secure compliance but for all that 'it is not Henry VII who has left his mark on the nation's memory'. In many ways the real story of this book begins with Henry VIII, who so successfully created an image of kingship which in addition to its usual attributes also 'claimed the sacred and amorous as discourses of state'. It was Henry's achievement to cast himself as the embodiment of the nation, and Sharpe follows the unfolding of this through many different forms of expression. His success was that he beguiled his audience. He stayed in power 'not least because he and those others who represented him, if they did not "impose his fiction on the world"' (citing Greenblatt) still 'made it the dominant story of a newly emerging nation'. All Henry's children took valuable lessons from his ability to construct his royal image, but it was Elizabeth whose achievement was the most considerable, not least because her gender allowed her 'to represent both vulnerability and strength'. By the end of the 16th century, the 'person of Elizabeth, as well as the monarchy, had become a public site and text, represented and re-presented not only *to* but *by* the public – in ways that the first Tudor could not have imagined'.

The vast scope of this great book means that it will be open to challenges from many directions. There are many small points of detail that might be contested – should we really describe the Boleyns as Lutherans? Did Henry VIII really only concentrate on his image-building after the break with Rome? Would a Tudor audience have read sexual meaning into a royal portrait with quite as much facility as we do? Is it really the case that 'more than her predecessors, Elizabeth had to work with parliaments'? There are also omissions; music, dance and jewels, for example, deserve inclusion as Sharpe notes apologetically in the preface. These are of relatively small importance. It could be argued that there are greater omissions. There is not enough consideration of the fact that this was an era of huge religious change, upheaval, doubt and conflict. The discussion of texts, rituals, and objects would be enhanced by a much greater awareness that a whole world of religious texts, rituals and objects was being pulled apart at precisely the same time as these images of rulers were being pieced together. This neglect may perhaps be a result of the correlation between Tudor politics and modern politics being taken a shade too far. This encourages not just the marginalization of religious beliefs, but also a lack of regard for other forms of ideology. The loyalty of Tudor subjects to their monarchs was not solely dependent on the efficacy of their political 'spin'; it was also deeply grounded in convictions that the monarch was divinely appointed, and that obedience was a Christian duty, an idea which continued to transcend the emerging confessional divisions. Religion and ideological commitment may have largely dropped out of modern political discourse, but they were both fairly central to Tudor politics, and in his preoccupation with representation Sharpe does tend to forget this.

The central arguments of this book should also prompt some useful debate. There are many points of interpretation open to question in what the author rightly sees – despite its length – as essentially an essay, a highly individual series of reflections on some very big questions. Most immediately, Sharpe's views on historical methodology are bound to stir up some strong feelings. To be fair, he does warn that whilst abandoning the usual distinction between 'events and representations' we must still 'retain the historian's (perhaps unique) concern with exact moments, particular circumstances, and change'. When he insists that 'simply placing a Holbein next to a sermon, or viewing a medal alongside a spectacle, or attempting a thick description of an engraving are themselves informative and worthwhile', it is hard to argue. The difficulties arise on two levels. One problem is that 'reading' historical texts in this way tends to suggest that all such texts are equally valid, equally important. Henry VII's self-fashioning, for example, is read by Sharpe through the medium of contemporary sources, but also through the prism of Francis Bacon's 17th-century opinions and arguably also David Hume's 18th-century viewpoint. Of course these sources are all valid, but arguably they are not all equally valid, and some more rigorous contextualizing is necessary if we are to get the balance right. The other problem is that we are in danger of overruling how 16th-century men and women might have 'read' these images with how we ourselves are inclined to 'read' them. In such circumstances, perhaps it is no bad thing if early modern historians remain 'anxious about the risk of anachronism'. It depends, of course, whether we want to hold on to a belief, or at least an aspiration, of

historical objectivity. It is not entirely clear whether Sharpe still believes in historical truth, but certainly for many readers he will have embraced some aspects of postmodernism rather too readily. He is also perhaps a little unfair to the profession; he is right that we need to take a more interdisciplinary approach, but the critical use of sources and in particular the consciousness of how royal pronouncements were *received* as well as how they were *intended* is more widespread than he allows.

The chief danger of Sharpe's approach is evidenced in what seems to me the biggest flaw in the book, namely the confusion of the history of *representation* with the history of *reputation*. If, as the author acknowledges, memories are 'unstable, contested and virtually impossible to control', he is arguably relying too much on the assumption that memories of the Tudors from the 17th to the 21st centuries can tell us very much about how this theatrical dynasty was viewed in its own time. He has been too swift to assume that the later reputations, in particular of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, must reflect their skills in self-fashioning whilst in power. The consequence is that alongside this very modern concern with 'reading' images lurk some surprisingly old-fashioned prejudices, which result in a rather dismissive treatment of Henry VII, a lack of interest in Henry VIII before the break with Rome, and a disproportionate concentration on the reign of Elizabeth I. Whether a cross-section of 21st century individuals can recognize a post-card of one monarch or another is not a reliable indicator of how successfully their image was constructed in the 16th century. There is too close a connection between the author noting that 'Henry VII was the Tudor who failed my postcard recognition test' and his insistence that he was 'in the most literal sense, less colourful, that is less spectacularly represented' than his son. If Elizabeth's reputation was hailed 'in the 1630s, then the 1650s, and the 1680s', surely that tells us something about the 17th century but rather less about the 16th? The history of representation is important but the Tudors' later reputations are not particularly good evidence for understanding that representation.

Allowing undue weight to later historical reputation has distorted some of the central judgements of this book. This is most clearly seen with the rather unsatisfying discussion of Mary I. Mary has been criticized by English historians ever since she died, and her reputation has always been atrocious, because she was the last Catholic monarch of a Catholic England which subsequently became a Protestant nation. Sharpe is prepared to acknowledge that she and her regime had considerable skills when it came to the representation of her authority, but he still concludes that she was 'the first, and only, Tudor who entirely lost the competition for representation, and in the process tainted her faith as well as her memory'. He does note the opinions of contemporaries who thought that Mary 'had the love, commendation and admiration of the world', or who praised their 'innocent and unspotted queen' who had embraced the true faith and 'married herself unto her realm'. He even recognizes that much of this is language we would normally associate with Elizabeth. But the weight of Mary's later reputation sinks the balance against her. This is upside down. To ignore later ideas, founded on Protestant convictions, and focus exclusively on how Mary was perceived by her own subjects would achieve a much more interesting, accurate and revolutionary result. As it is, by countenancing one later prejudice others then follow. It is assumed that the burnings, 'as we know' strengthened opposition, although Eamon Duffy has recently suggested quite the contrary. English Catholicism is described inaccurately as 'ultramontane' and 'Spanish'. Sharpe suggests that the queen's wedding service at Winchester 'may have been for many their first – certainly the first for some years – display of full Catholic ceremonial', which is an odd perspective on a country which had only abandoned the Latin Mass six years before. True, Mary stands condemned less for her religion than for her Spanish husband, but the negative conclusions are all of a piece with the usual judgements, and they allow her later reputation – and later anti-Spanish feeling – to obscure her undoubted talents for self-fashioning, many of which Elizabeth was to emulate. 'Mary did not only fail in selling herself as the champion of the English commonweal and nation; she allowed others to present her religion as un-English'. This conclusion is the direct result of paying too much attention to how Mary was seen after she was dead, and not enough to her representation whilst she was alive.

One last interpretation remains controversial, namely the notion that this concern with representation made monarchy more accountable. Sharpe thinks that the Tudors 'led authority itself to be negotiated as well as represented'. This was initially Henry VIII's doing: 'through projecting his person and power, Henry VIII

began a process of demystifying kingship and enfranchising subjects'. There is definitely something in this, but the argument goes too far when it calls the 'story of this volume ... the story of the gradual enthrallment of the monarchy to its subjects'. For one thing, popular opinion had mattered rather more before the 16th century than Sharpe acknowledges. For another, it is one thing to involve your subjects, another to actually 'enfranchise' them. Tudor monarchy was undoubtedly debated, but it was not elected. This also needs to be seen in the context of religious change. If it was Henry VIII and Elizabeth I who poured their energy and ingenuity into the work of self-fashioning, this was because it was these two monarchs who demanded the biggest change of loyalty from their subjects. Henry demanded that his people surrender their age-old loyalty to the papacy and the monasteries; Elizabeth wrested them away from their traditional religious beliefs and rituals. If in the process their subjects became more critical, more perceptive, it was perhaps less a result of their representations of authority and more a consequence of ideological division.

Selling the Tudor Monarchy is a huge achievement. It is not without its problems, but it is also an important, thought-provoking and richly rewarding book which should be required reading for every early modern scholar. Its eagerness to engage with the central questions of historical method, its passionate insistence on an interdisciplinary approach, its vast scope and its grand ideas are a great addition to the scholarship of the Tudor period. It will be even more interesting to see Sharpe take the same approach to the 17th century, which is arguably in even greater need of this treatment than the Tudor era. We look forward to the next two volumes.

The author has not responded to this review.

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